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ABSTRACT

Although social gerontologists recognize the heterogeneous nature of elderly populations, they have relied on the use of aggregate data and chronological age rather than sociological variables in their research. The notion of stigma, as developed by Goffman (1963), applied to the elderly focuses on social relationships rather than individual attributes, and can assist in understanding the social meaning of old age in contemporary American society. Social stigma is a discrepancy between virtual and actual social identity; an individual attribute, in this case age, can be stigmatizing when it fails to conform to age-related norms. Once a stigma exists, socially legitimated discrimination results. Social stigma for the elderly has resulted in a classless view of aging which ignores the differences across sex, and ethnic and class boundaries. It also allows for the use of derogatory terms for old people. In defense against the stigma, elderly individuals tend to deny their old age through physical disguises, the attainment of active mastery in areas traditionally closed to elders, avoidance of social interactions with other age groups, or self-other identification. Because they become stigmatized in later life, the elderly may have difficulty in re-identifying themselves and may experience a special likelihood of self-disapproval. To overcome the stigma, elderly individuals must face their chronological age and refine the meaning of old age for themselves. (BL)

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Aspects of the Aging Stigma

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While social gerontologists have recognized that "the elderly" constitute a very heterogeneous population, they have had limited success when treating the complexities of this social category in their writings. This is due, in part, to their reliance on aggregate data and the use of age as a chronological rather than a sociological variable in their research. This paper proposes that the notion of stigma, as developed by Erving Goffman (1963), applied to "the elderly" takes apart the category by focusing attention on social relationships rather than on individual attributes and, therefore, assists in understanding the social meaning of old age in contemporary American society. Additionally, several of Goffman's insights on social stigma illuminate perplexing research discoveries in social gerontology. (N.B., This paper is heavily indebted to Goffman's writings in Stigma. The book will not be adequately referenced in this paper.)

According to Goffman, a social stigma "constitutes a special discrepancy between virtual and actual social identity"; that is, individuals are discreditable (potentially stigmatized) if their attributes make them less than what is socially expected for the social categories into which they are placed. It is not the attribute itself that produces stigma. Rather, is is the relationship between the attribute and expectations held by others. As the expectations of others may vary, a specific attribute can indicate stigma or normality. Due to the existence of age-related norms, old age is not universally stigmatized; rather, the production of aging stigma is situationally specific.

Goffman remarks that while normals act with benevolence toward the stigmatized, "we believe that the person with a stigma is not quite human." On the basis of this belief, socially legitimated discrimination procedes which reduces the life chances of the stigmatized. Older Americans are subject to an aging stigma theory, or ideology, which explains their inferiority and the possible dangers which they represent. Estes (1979) notes one ideology which considers old age to be a special and different problem, marked by eventual physical decline. This belief leads to policies and programs which ignore the complexities of social life. Estes states: "The decremental focus also encourages policies that apply equally to all social classes, while ignoring less popular programs that might highlight the poverty status of the aged. This classless view of aging emphasizes the simularities (and negative image) of all older persons: everybody, no matter what his or her social class, ages physiologically. De-emphasized are the differences across sex, ethnic, and class boundaries within the same age groups." (1979: 17-18) In the realm of social policy, the aging stigma theory disregards both individual and subgroup differences among the aged and encapulates a perspective which Binstock terms <u>compassionate ageism</u>: "For four decades the friends of the elderly told us that they were poor, frail, socially dependent, objects of discrimination, and above all deserving -- or in the jargon of economists, victims of market failure, not individual failure." (1983:140)

The aging stigma theory allows for the use of derogatory terms for old people in daily discourse without considering the original meaning, e.g., old maid, old codger, crone, hag. How-

ever, in addition to imputing a range of imperfections on the basis of the discreditable attribute, desirable qualities may also be attributed to the elderly on the same basis, that of advanced age. "Experience" and "wisdom" are two such socially desirable qualities which may be granted to an elder even in the absence of their demonstration.

Elderly individuals, like others with different handicaps, tend to hold the same views about the worth of their identity as others do. This leads to denial of the stigma -- denial of one's own old age. Thus, it is not surprising that numerous research studies have found that the elderly tend to have negative attitudes regarding being old themselves (Cf. West, 1983; Brubaker and Powers, 1976) and the reluctance of people with advanced chronological age to classify themselves as old.

A variety of responses to the situation are available to the stigmatized. One response is for the stigmatized to correct whatever is the objective basis for failing. In the case of those stigmatized by age, it is not uncommon for individuals to lie about their age, use cosmetics, hair pieces and dyes, or even undergo plastic surgery in order to disguise objective chronological age. Another response is the attainment of active mastery in areas felt to be closed to the elderly, e.g., the continuation of full-time work well past the expected time of retirement or continued sex and procreation into later life. It is also possible to use the aging stigma for secondary gains, i.e., as an excuse for ill success due to other reasons or as a reason to avoid social responsibility and violate social norms. One illus-

tration of this response is the widow described by Hochschild (1973) who avoided jury duty by feigning that she was hard of hearing. It is also possibe to view the suffering of the stigma as a blessing in disguise as does F. Scott-Maxwell when she considers aging to be "a place of fierce energy," and of "wild life that is almost incommunicable." (Gadow, 1983: 144) And then there are those who re-assess the limitations of normals from their new stigmatized position, as is the case of those elders who remark that they are now able to appreciate the beauty of nature, a beauty that is overlooked or wasted upon the young who are two busy to appreciate it.

Of course, the actions of the stigmatized will vary depending upon the types of social contacts in which they are engaged. Mixed contacts may be avoided completely, especially when the elders are unsure of how others may receive them. It is not surprising that there is a growth in age segregated residences. Some ideas developed by Hochschild in her study of the retirement community of Merrill Court are relevant here. She notes that some of the widows form extremely close interpersonal relationships with others outside the retirement community, generally a daughter, which she considers to be "altruistic surrender." Hochschild goes on to argue that this type of self-other identification is more probable under the following four conditions:(1) relative deprivation, (2) contact with the other -- the object of envy, (3) the other must be willing to be surrendered to, i.e., the other must provide enough information to the elder to make identification possible, and (4) organizational and ideological supports for altruistic surrender. The significance of these

factors is extremely important in light of Hochschild's finding that "...not all young people are liked simply for their youth, but only the young with whom identification can be established." (1973: 103)

Of course, other forms of social interaction are likely to occur when the elderly are with "their own," i.e., other elderly individuals. Age can be the basis for organizing life in a formal manner, and in fact, there are numerous organizations such as the American Association of Retired Persons, the Gerontological Society of America, and the National Council on the Aging, which are concerned principally with aging issues. Such organizations sponsor publications which formulate the ideology of the elderly -- their complaints, aspirations, and problems. Such publications frequently contain information to enable the readers to become aware of who their friends and enemies are, stories which document the successes of "plucky oldsters," and tales of the atrocities committed against them. As expected, these publications do contain some diversity of opinion and numerous advertisements for needed services and equipment.

Some may organize their personal/professional life around the issue of aging to such an extent that they become the "professional representatives" of the aged and, thus, begin a new career. They are thus removed from the sphere of the stigmatized as their failings become their strengths and they cease to be fully representative of the elderly. F. Scott-Maxwell, who was quoted above, is a case in point. These "professional representatives" are the speakers and writers who view their own age as

something worth attention.

We should also note that the aging stigma has an effect on "the wise," those who work with or around the aged and those who are related to them via social structure. Most significantly, the aging stigma may spread to those people, and they will become the recipients of what Goffman calls a "courtesy stigma." This is illustrated by a recent article in The Chronical of Higher Education in which the author encouraged the readers to make use of the calendar section of the publication when selecting professional meetings to attend. She warned, however, "Eliminate topics that are downers, such as aging; these are bound to be depressing meetings."(Brams, 1983: 56) Thus, not only is aging a depressing thing to be endured, but it is also a depressing subject matter for intellectual discussion and should be avoided. The field of gerontology is also stigmatized.

Another ccnsideration regarding social stigmas of all sorts is the moral career of the individuals involved. An important aspect of this career is the timing of the stigma or of one's awareness of it. Goffman notes four different socialization patterns: (1) inborn stigma, for cases in which the individuals learn the standards of normals and of their own disadvantaged status at the same time; (2) cases in which the stigmatized individuals are protected by others through isolation; (3) becoming stigmatized later in life; and (4) those cases in which individuals are first reared in an alien community and then must learn another way of life.

It is the third pattern, becoming stigmatized later in life which obviously applies to the case of aging. With this pattern

there is generally not a radical reorganization of the past for the elders have learned about both the normal and the stigmatized long before becoming socially deficient. However, as with other stigmas which occur later in life, the individuals may have a special problem in re-identifying themselves and a special likelihood of disapproval of self. As the elderly learn initially who they are categorized with, they may feel ambivalent for the others, may have other attributes that are difficult to associate with.

These aspects of the aging stigma punctuate the conversation of "Daisy," a woman who underwent a facelift in order to preserve some of her youthful appearance. She is a woman of approximately 50 years old, divorced, and a mother. When she was asked how she felt about getting older, her response was clear:

> "Terrified. Getting old is a very strange experience. What is so upsetting is when the past starts to become more interesting than the future, and, you don't know quite how to act anymore. You say -- should I now behave like a little old lady. How do little old ladies actually behave? If I start to look at a man the way I used to look at them, sort of faintly flirtatious, because I'm incredibly romantic, do I make a total ass of myself? Is that really a little old lady standing behind that -- so I don't quite know how to behave anymore."(WGHB Educational Foundation, 1983)

Due to the ambivalence attached to stigmas, individuals frequently go through an "affiliation cycle." Thus, elderly individuals may vascillate in their identification and participation with other elders. At times, however, objective turning points are used as a mechanism for understanding one's current status. Social gerontologists have discovered numerous turning points for the passage into old age: the empty nest, menopause,

death of a spouse, retirement, hospitalization, disability, or a specific birthday (often 70). These events frequently induce individuals to think about themselves, sort things out, and arrive at new understandings of what is important in life.

Like other stigmatized individuals, the elderly frequently stratify their own on the basis of the visiblility and obtrusiveness of the stigma or other factors associated with it. The individuals both affiliate and separate with their own. The "poor dear hiearachy" which Hochschild observed at Merrill Court is a good example of this type of stratification. Additionally, from my own observations at a middle class senior center, I noticed that the participants in the center's activities never referred to themselves as old or elderly; however, they would use the term to categorize others with whom they would not be confused, e.g., an "old Chinaman" in a Chinese travelogue.

Furthermore, stigmatized individuals are warned against trying to pass completely and against totally accepting the negative attitudes of others. Thus, while someone like Daisy may get a facelift, there are even limits to which people should go to keep a youthful appearance. Regarding the acceptance of negative attitudes, it is not uncommon to come across these quips or bumper stickers which reject the negative image of growing old: "I'm not getting older; I'm getting better"; or "I'm not a dirty old man. I'm a sexy senior citizen." Sayings such as these indicate that aging is a situation which can be taken in stride.

The compounding element here is that while many chronologically older individuals do retain the negative image of old age,

they also redefine the meaning of old age. Research by Fontana and Hochschild suggest that the chronologically old do not view old age as a status to be contrasted with youth or middle age. Rather, according to Fontana, "To be old...means to be conscious of one's ailments, to pity oneself, to become passive, to give up on life."(1977, 175) selected responses from his subjects support and illustrate these ideas:

-- "I think the only thing that makes you feel old is when you're left alone." This respondent also noted that she felt old when she broke her hip; however, she was able to dismiss the feelings then. She could not dismiss the feelings when her husband died.(88)

-- Another subject identified some old people at a senior center as the ones who "...are not active at all. Some of them just give up on life."(88)

-- And another subject could identify times during which she felt old: "There were times when I stopped and thought...gee...you're really getting old. It was at those times when I didn't have an interest. I was bored."(90)

Similarly, Hochschild noted that the widows that she studied, people whom she considered to be old, did not consider themselves to be old.(1973: 5) To the widows, to be old was to be "put on a shelf," "to have your feet up," i.e., to be alone and inactive. Additionally, Hochschild noted that the Merrill Court residents would not live according to age-norms when interacting among themselves. They acted freely and spontaneously -- dancing or simply acting silly -- in the age segregated company. Among

their own they were not influenced by the aging stigma.(1973: 72)

This paper proposes that viewing aging in contemporary American society as a form of social stigma assists in understanding some perplexing empirical findings. Furthermore, by examining the aging stigma it becomes apparent that the meaning of old age is situationally specific. This creates the possibility that aging is not universally stigmatized. Further work must be done to delineate the specific circumstances in which aging is stigmatized and the underlying causes of stigmatization.

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